

Trusting One's Senses: McDowell on Experience, Belief and Justification

Martin Gustafsson

Must I not begin to trust somewhere? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not, so to speak, rash but forgivable. Rather, it belongs to judging.¹

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will ascribe to the author of *Mind and World* the following view. The basic, default attitude we have toward sense experience cannot be a matter of critical assessment. It cannot typically be the case that we step back from and reflect on the veridicality of our experiences before we come to believe what they purport to reveal about the world. Rather, in the default case, what happens is that we trust our senses without further ado – we trust that things are as our experience represents them as being. It is only against the background of such widespread trust that critical scrutiny of particular experiences is possible. Specific doubts make sense only because doubt is not generally present.

Readers of *Mind and World* might find this interpretation surprising, questionable, or even downright mistaken. For in that book, John McDowell may seem to be downplaying or even ignoring the importance of perceptual belief-formation that is unreflective in the just described sense. Indeed, some of the wordings he uses to spell out the contrast between the active nature of judgment and the passive character of experience may be taken to suggest a view in direct opposition to the one I have just sketched – a view according to which the testimony of the senses is in the typical case a matter of decision-making based on reflection on the credentials of the relevant experience.

¹ Wittgenstein (1969), §150: “Muß ich nicht irgendwo anfangen zu trauen? D. h. ich muß irgendwo mit dem Nicht-zweifeln anfangen; und das ist nicht, so zu sagen, vorschnell aber verzeihlich, sondern es gehört zum Urteilen.” Translation amended.

For example, he writes that “[h]ow one’s experience represents things to be is not under one’s control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it.”² In a similar vein, he claims that the content of an experience “becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value.”³ Such formulations may seem to imply that unreflective trust is at most of secondary importance to perceptual belief-formation, and have been taken as evidence that McDowell’s conception of the relation between belief and experience is implausibly intellectualist and voluntarist.

A more comprehensive study of his writings, however, shows that this intellectualist-voluntarist interpretation is mistaken. In fact, McDowell is quite explicit that he never wanted to deny that our default attitude toward sense experience is a matter of unreflective trust. Thus he writes that “[u]nless there is ground for suspicion, such as odd lightning conditions, having it look to one as if things are a certain way [...] becomes accepting that things are that way by a sort of default.”⁴ At another place, he notes that “coming to believe something on the basis of experience is not in general happily conceived as deciding what to think. [...] Normally we arrive at our perceptually based beliefs without reflection.”⁵

It should be noted that such passages involve no concession to the idea that sense experience is *non-conceptual*. ‘Without reflection’ does not mean ‘without the use of concepts’. Quite the contrary: McDowell’s point presupposes that experience is conceptual. For what he is claiming is that in the standard case, perceptual beliefs are formed without critical assessment of the particular experience whose content is being endorsed as true; and for there to be any experiential content to be endorsed, reflectively *or* unreflectively – for the endorsement to be a matter of accepting *that things are thus and so* (namely, as one’s experience represents them as being) – that content must be conceptual. Or, so McDowell believes; and I do not want to question that idea, at least not here.

Now, McDowell also claims that for such unreflective trust to be a matter of accepting that things are as one’s experience represents them as being, she who trusts must have the capacity to *sometimes* engage in the

2 McDowell (1996), 11.

3 McDowell (1996), 26.

4 McDowell (2009a), 11.

5 McDowell (2009a), 139 ff.

sort of reflection in which one steps back from and reflects on the credibility of some particular experience. According to McDowell, a perceiver's acceptance of what her senses tell her constitutes an epistemologically significant move – a move in the logical space of reasons – only insofar as the conceptual resources at work in that process are resources that the perceiver is also able to employ in assessing the credentials of particular experiences whenever there *are* concrete grounds for suspicion. Trust of the sort we are considering here can figure only in subjects who can also *now and then* refuse to believe their senses.⁶

So, for McDowell, there *is* an important sense in which the ability to employ conceptual capacities in critical reasoning is essential to the possibility of forming perceptual beliefs. His claim is that a creature totally incapable of such free, critical reasoning has no concepts, and hence cannot form any perceptual beliefs at all, reflectively or unreflectively. But this claim does not entail that the unreflective formation of perceptual beliefs is any less basic than the reflective formation of such beliefs. Nor does it entail that such unreflective belief-formation is somehow illegitimate, or “rash but forgivable” (to use Wittgenstein's phrase in the epigraph). Rather, the idea is that this sort of trust inevitably goes together with a capacity to engage in critical assessment whenever there is a genuine, positive reason to do so.

What I am going to argue is that he thinks the converse is also true. Just as he takes unreflective perceptual belief-formation to require a capacity for critical assessment, he takes the capacity for critical assessment to require that one's default attitude toward experience is a matter of unreflective trust. According to McDowell, the idea of someone whose typical stance is to step back from and scrutinize her experiences before she accepts what they reveal about the world is no more intelligible than the idea of someone who can form beliefs only by unreflectively accepting that things are as her experience represents them as being.

2. Two Worries

In everyday life, if I am asked for a justification of my belief that *p*, an answer of the form, ‘I see that *p*’ is often considered to do the job. Suppose Julia asks me over the phone what reason I have to think that Paul

6 Cf. McDowell (2009a), 141.

is wearing a red shirt at Peter's birthday party, and I reply: 'Well, I'm at the party and Paul is right in front of me; I see that he is wearing a red shirt.' Unless Julia has some specific positive reason to question my honesty or my ability to visually discern such things – unless she knows I am color-blind, for example – it would be outrageous of her not to find my answer satisfactory.

It is a central feature of McDowell's conception of experience that he thinks this form of justification is all right as it stands. A fruitful approach to his view is therefore to look at two philosophical worries that may arise with respect to this form of justification, and consider McDowell's responses to them.

The first worry is this:

Seeing that p is a belief-dependent, or *doxastic* notion. I see that p only if I believe that p. However, the mere fact that I believe that p in no way justifies my belief that p. So, if we want to identify what it is about my seeing that p that justifies my belief that p, we have to purge it of its doxastic element; the justificatory power must reside in the non-doxastic part of my seeing that p. In other words, a philosophically proper characterization of the everyday justificatory pattern described above would have to start from an analysis of 'I see that p' into 'I believe that p', and a residue Φ – where Φ signifies that which really does the justificatory work. The philosophical task will then be to find the adequate characterization of Φ . What we can be sure of is that Φ will not be identical with, but only a part of, my seeing that p. Hence, the everyday way of specifying the ground of my perceptual belief that p in terms of my seeing that p is inexact.

As we shall see, McDowell's answer to this worry is simply to deny that we have to think of 'seeing that p' in doxastic terms. According to McDowell, a philosophically more significant notion of 'seeing that p' – the notion that figures in the sort of everyday justificatory procedure whose legitimacy he is concerned to defend – is such that one can see that p without believing that p.

However, even if one accepts that the relevant notion of 'seeing that p' is non-doxastic, one might still be worried that the envisaged procedure of justification cannot be a matter of genuine justification. This second worry can be spelled out as follows:

Someone's seeing that p entails that p is actually the case: *seeing that p* is a *factive* notion. It follows that I cannot take myself (or anyone else) to be seeing that p, unless I already believe that p. After all, if I didn't believe that p, I would not take myself (or anyone else) to be seeing that p, but only to be 'having the impression that p', or something similar. In other words, I would then characterize the relevant experience in *non-factive* terms. Con-

sequently, making use of my *factively* characterized experience to justify my belief means putting the cart before the horse. I can take myself to be entitled to such a factive characterization only if I take myself to be entitled to believe that *p*; but this latter entitlement was precisely what the experience was supposed to *give* me.

As we shall see, McDowell's answer to this second worry is that it involves thinking of the justificatory procedure in terms of making an inference – say:

I see that Paul is wearing a red shirt.
Consequently, Paul is wearing a red shirt.

The worry is not about the validity of this inference. It is clearly valid. Nor is it about the truth of the premise or of the conclusion. It can be assumed that they are both true. Rather, the worry is that my *performing* this inference cannot be a matter of my providing genuine support for the belief that Paul is wearing a red shirt, since I (or anyone else) can take myself to be entitled to accept the premise only if I already take myself to be entitled to accept the conclusion.

McDowell's way of rejecting this worry is to argue that the presumed inferential model does not fit what is going on in the sort of everyday case where I justify my belief that Paul is wearing a red shirt by reference to my seeing that Paul is wearing a red shirt. This procedure, McDowell argues, is justificatory even if it involves no inference at all.

By exploring in greater detail the two worries that I have just described and McDowell's responses to them, I will find the material needed to support my earlier claim about the centrality of unreflective belief-formation for McDowell's outlook. The structure of my discussion will be as follows. I begin, in section 3, by clarifying McDowell's response to the first worry, concerning the allegedly doxastic character of 'seeing that *p*'. In section 4, I provide a detailed discussion of various aspects of McDowell's alternative, non-doxastic conception – a discussion which lays bare an important connection between the first worry and the second one (concerning factivity and justification). In section 5, I spell out McDowell's response to that second worry. I then explain how this response leads up to the view I have ascribed to him in section 1. Very roughly, my claim will be that McDowell's way of navigating between an inferential and a brutally non-conceptual view of perceptual belief-formation is precisely to think of such belief-formation in terms of unreflective yet fully rational trust.

3. Is Seeing Believing?

I begin by considering McDowell's response to the worry about the alleged belief-dependence of 'seeing that p'.

Sentences such as the following do seem somehow absurd:

(1) I see that the tie is green, but I don't believe that it is green.

Whence the absurdity? One possible explanation is that seeing that p entails believing that p. According to Barry Stroud, it is a "truism" that "[a] person who sees that it is raining judges or believes or accepts or otherwise puts forward as true that it is raining. [...] To see that p is to judge that p."⁷ If this is right, (1) is absurd since it entails the contradiction, 'I believe that the tie is green, but I don't believe that it is green'.

This would explain not only the absurdity of (1). It would also mean that the following sentences are just as bizarre:

(2) I saw that the tie was green, but I didn't believe that it was green.

(3) She sees that the tie is green, but she doesn't believe that it is green.

And aren't they? I think it should be admitted that Stroud's "truism" captures *one* intelligible notion of 'seeing that p' – a notion which is belief-dependent or 'doxastic' in the same sense as 'recognizing that p', 'realizing that p', and so on.

Still, there might well be some other notion of 'seeing that p' which is equally legitimate and of deeper philosophical interest. According to McDowell, there is indeed such a philosophically more fundamental notion. In his discussions of experience, knowledge and thought, McDowell is working with a notion of 'seeing that p' such that (2) and (3) are not absurd. According to this belief-independent or non-doxastic conception, seeing that p does not entail believing that p. Thus, suppose that you are looking at what you mistakenly believe is an instance of the Müller-Lyer illusion – a drawing of the familiar sort, but where one of the lines is in fact a little longer than the other. Knowing about the Müller-Lyer, you refuse to believe what your eyes tell you. You are convinced that the lines are equally long, despite the fact that your experience correctly represents one line as longer than the other. In such a case, McDowell would say: You see that one line is longer than the other, but you don't believe it.

7 Stroud (2002), 84.

Or, to use the example that figures in the sentences (1)–(3): Suppose you are looking at a green tie in what you wrongly take to be illumination of a sort that makes it impossible to tell what color things are. In fact, the lightning conditions are normal. Again, McDowell claims, you refuse to accept what you do in fact see. You see that the tie is green, but you do not believe it.⁸

McDowell is not denying the absurdity of (1). Rather, the point is that his notion of 'seeing that p' is such that the absurdity of (1) stems only from the fact that 'seeing that p' entails 'p', and, hence, that 'I see that the tie is green, but I don't believe that it is green' entails the Moore-paradoxical construction:

(4) The tie is green, but I don't believe that it is green.

So according to McDowell, even if *saying* (1) is clearly absurd, this in no way forces us to conclude that seeing that p entails believing that p. As he construes the notion of 'seeing that p', the absurdity has to do instead with the fact that one cannot take oneself to be seeing that p without believing that p. Hence the adding of the second conjunct, 'I don't believe that it is green', makes my utterance of the whole sentence Moore-paradoxically absurd.

One may feel that McDowell's notion of 'seeing that p' is strained or artificial. Again, I suspect the spontaneous reaction among most speakers to sentences such as (2) and (3) is that they are inconsistent, or at least quite awkward. As Hannah Ginsborg notices, in such cases it is probably more natural to say of the person in question that even if the green color she perceives is indeed the color of the tie, she fails to see (realize, appreciate) that the tie is green.⁹ On the other hand, there are natural occurrences of 'seeing that p' that are in line with McDowell's analysis rather than with Stroud's. Consider a situation in which a tie appears green to me and I haven't yet decided whether to trust the appearance or not. So, I ask myself: Do I really see that the tie is green? Given Stroud's notion of 'seeing that p', this question can be readily answered in the negative simply in virtue of the fact that I have not yet formed the

8 McDowell (2002), 277 f., McDowell (2004), 214, McDowell (2009a), 9, fn. 10. Sellars uses a similarly non-doxastic notion of 'seeing that p' in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'. Cf. Sellars (1963), 145. In fact I think the view I am ascribing to McDowell in this paper is quite close to Sellars's view in his most famous essay.

9 Ginsborg (2006), 298.

belief that the tie is green. But that is obviously to miss the whole point of the question.¹⁰

In any case, it seems clear that Stroud's and McDowell's different notions are both intelligible. So, again, the central issue is perhaps not which one is the more natural, but which one is philosophically the most consequential. McDowell thinks his non-doxastic notion of 'seeing that p' is the one we need to clarify the nature of perception, knowledge and thought. "[T]his notion," he says, "is the right one for my purposes" – the suggestion being that someone like Stroud, who is blind to the very possibility of this notion, will also be blind to the insights that it can help us achieve.¹¹ In order to understand what these insights might be, we have to look at McDowell's response to the second worry described in section 2: that about the *factivity* of 'seeing that p'. Interestingly, this worry and McDowell's response to it are best approached via some further reflections on what he has to say about the belief-independence of experience.

4. Two Aspects of Belief-Independence

The non-doxastic character of 'seeing that p' is explicitly discussed in several of McDowell's writings from the beginning of the 2000's and onward. In Lecture 3 of *Mind and World*, there is also a discussion of the belief-independence of experience, but there a somewhat different point is being made. More precisely, what McDowell is talking about there is a sort of belief-independence that becomes discernible when experience is characterized in *non-factive* terms. He is discussing and arguing for the non-doxastic character of 'It appears to S as if p', 'S has the impression that p', and so on. This is also how Gareth Evans talks about belief-independence in *The Varieties of Reference*, and McDowell thinks Evans is "very perceptive" on this point.¹²

Evans notes that "[i]t is a well-known fact about perceptual illusions that it will continue to appear to us as though, say, one line is a little longer than the other (in the Müller-Lyer illusion) even when we are quite sure that it is not".¹³ McDowell makes the same point: "a familiar

10 Ginsborg (2006), 298 f.

11 McDowell (2002), 277.

12 McDowell (1996), 61.

13 Evans (1982), 123.

visual illusion continues to present its illusory appearance even though the subject does not believe that things are as they look".¹⁴ This seems to be the easiest way of illustrating belief-independence with respect to non-factive characterizations of experience: In confronting what I *rightly* take to be an instance of the Müller-Lyer, *it appears to me as if* one line is longer than the other even if I do not believe it. Contrast this with the sort of case most easily used to illustrate belief-independence with respect to factive constructions such as 'seeing that p': In confronting what I *wrongly* take to be an instance of the Müller-Lyer, *I see that* one line is longer than the other even if I do not believe it.

What is the relation between these two notions of belief-independence? At first sight, they may seem utterly different – so different, indeed, that only one of them (the 'non-factive, *Mind and World*-Evans variety) has to do with *experience as such*. Thus, compare:

- (1) I see that the tie is green, but I don't believe that it is green.
- (5) I have the visual impression that the tie is green, but I don't believe that it is green.

The difference between the two notions of belief-independence must surely be tied to the fact that an utterance of (1) has the sort of Moore-paradoxical absurdity described above, whereas an utterance of (5) is not absurd at all. Now if one reflects further on the absurd character of (1), it may start to look as if we can explain the special belief-independence of 'I see that p' exclusively in terms of the fact *that p* – a fact seemingly external to the experience itself. After all, as has already been pointed out, (1) is absurd precisely because it entails,

- (4) The tie is green, but I don't believe that it is green.

So, it would seem that if we subtract the fact that the tie is green from my seeing that the tie is green, we subtract the very thing that makes the belief-independence of 'seeing that p' have the special, Moore-paradoxical character described earlier. After the subtraction (the argument continues), all that remains is the experience itself – my having the visual impression that the tie is green – and this experience, purged of any reference to the external fact that the tie is green, is belief-independent only in the straightforward, non-Moorean way described by Evans and in *Mind and World*. The upshot seems to be that the other, Moorean sort of belief-independence is, so to speak, an artificial product of con-

14 McDowell (1996), 60.

joining the experience itself with the external fact due to which the experience is veridical.

And the conclusion might seem obvious: If we want to understand the nature of experience as such, the factive yet non-doxastic notion of experience that McDowell is working with cannot be of fundamental philosophical significance. For that notion now appears like a mere conglomerate of the experience itself – something that can be fully captured in non-factive terms – and a fact external to that experience. And what we want to understand when we ask philosophical questions about experience is surely not how such a conglomerate works. We want to know about how the experience *itself* works – how it is related to beliefs, to reality, and so forth. Hence (the argument continues), being blind to the mere conglomerate involved in McDowell's factive yet non-doxastic notion of experience does not seem so disastrous after all. Indeed, ignoring this notion of experience may even appear like sound philosophical instinct.

It is crucial to McDowell's conception that he rejects this argument, and the compositional view of veridical experience that underlies it. According to McDowell, I cannot perform the sort of subtraction suggested above without thereby distorting the nature of the very experience I am undergoing when I see that the tie is green. In such a veridical case, impression and fact are not distinguishable in the sense presupposed by the subtraction maneuver: "For a subject in the best [i.e., veridical] case, the appearance that there is a candle in front of her is the presence of the candle making itself apparent to her. This is not a mere seeming, which would be compatible with there being no candle there".¹⁵ So, we must not think that the belief-independence of experience factively characterized is a feature of a complex entity consisting of the experience *itself* plus some (or several) external fact(s). Nor should we think of the belief-independence of experience non-factively characterized as a feature of what would be a separable part of such a complex – the experience itself considered in isolation. Rather, these are points about two different aspects of one integrated phenomenon: the belief-independence of veridical experience. In a non-veridical case, only one of the aspects is there. But this is not to say that the second aspect – the aspect consisting of the belief-independence of, say, my seeing that *p* – is an aspect of something else, or something more, than the very experience I am having in a case where that experience reveals how things are. I can describe the *same*

15 McDowell (2009b), 281.

veridical experience in factive or in non-factive terms, and the different modes of belief-independence tied to these two different forms of description are both aspects of *that* experience – nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else.

5. The Non-Inferential Character of Perceptual Belief-Formation

It is exactly at this point that we can start to really sense how important it is for McDowell to respond to the second worry described in section 2: the worry that a seeing that *p* cannot be what justifies my belief that *p*, since I will take myself (or someone else) to be seeing that *p* only insofar as I already believe that *p*. If that worry is sound, McDowell's non-compositional conception of experience is at best epistemologically irrelevant. For what the worry seems to show is that in order to identify what it is in experience that plays a justificatory role, we have precisely to *decompose* my seeing that *p* into (i) the fact that *p*, and (ii) a non-factively characterized component, such as my having the visual impression that *p*; and it seems that it can only be the second, non-factive component that matters when it comes to justification.

Now it is certainly agreed by everyone that if such a decompositional conception is allowed to frame one's approach to epistemology, one will soon encounter well-known and terribly hard problems. The general ban on factive characterizations makes it hard to avoid a traditional conception of perceptual justification as a matter of bridging a gap between the inner realm of non-factive impressions and an outer realm of external facts. And no one has yet managed to explain what is supposed to make an inference such as the following sufficiently trustworthy to yield knowledge:

I have the visual impression that Paul is wearing a red shirt.
Consequently, Paul is wearing a red shirt.

In particular, the adding of more non-factive premises does not seem to help very much. Indeed, it is not clear that the envisaged distinction between inner and outer can even be made clear sense of. Many thinkers – including, as we shall see, McDowell – have come to the conclusion that the inner realm's alleged insulation from external reality makes it impossible to understand how the elements of that inner realm can have any content at all.

Struck by the inadequacies of such a picture, modern epistemology has looked for other options. One such influential suggestion is coherentism. The coherentist straightforwardly denies that there is a justificatory relation between experiential input and beliefs. According to the coherentist, what happens when I form the perceptual belief that Paul is wearing a red shirt is that I am *caused*, via my senses, to believe that Paul is wearing a red shirt. Thus, the worry about my use of an inference to justify my belief is supposed not to arise, simply because I do not engage in any justification. If there is justification going on at all, it can only be a matter of internal coherence: How does the belief I find myself saddled with after my encounter with Paul – namely, that he is wearing a red shirt – cohere with my system of other beliefs?

McDowell is dissatisfied with both the traditional and the coherentist responses. His most fundamental objection against the coherentist line of thought is not that it makes it difficult to understand how internal coherence among beliefs can give reason to think that those beliefs are true. Rather, his basic objection is that if there is no role other than a merely causal one for experiential input to play vis-à-vis our system of beliefs, it becomes inexplicable how those beliefs can have content (and thus be beliefs) at all – how they can be as much as true-*or-false*. According to McDowell, to understand how beliefs can have content, we need to conceive of experiential input as providing rational and not merely casual constraint.

However – and this is crucial to understanding McDowell's conception – he agrees with the coherentist that what happens when I form a perceptual belief about, say, the color of Paul's shirt, is *not* that I perform an inference. Like in coherentism, McDowell's way out of the traditional quandary involves denying that I infer that Paul is wearing a red shirt from some antecedently given, factive or non-factive, premise about what my experience is like. However, unlike the coherentist, McDowell nonetheless insists that I engage in a rational procedure of justification. According to McDowell, there *is* a rational connection between my seeing that Paul is wearing a red shirt and my belief that he is wearing a red shirt – a rational connection I exploit in finding reason to believe that Paul is wearing a red shirt. McDowell's point is that this rational connection cannot be understood in inferential terms.

How is this rational connection to be conceived, if not inferentially? This question goes to the very heart of McDowell's philosophy. It is a difficult question – which is not to say that, in the end, the answer might not be simple and straightforward. In what remains of this

paper, I will try to explain how I think McDowell conceives of the rational yet non-inferential relation between experience and belief.

6. The Rationality of Non-Inferential Belief-Formation

McDowell writes:

[M]y aim was to spell out how the idea of rationality is in play when we explain perceptual beliefs in terms of experience. And here the notion of inference gets no grip. When one acquires a belief in this way, one comes to believe that things are as one's experience reveals, or at least seems to reveal, that things are. The content that the explanation attributes to the experience is the same as the content of the belief explained, not a premise from which it would make sense to think of the subject as having reached the belief by an inferential step.¹⁶

So, what happens when I form the perceptual belief that Paul is wearing a red shirt is simply this: I come to believe what I see, namely, that Paul is wearing a red shirt. No inference takes place: I do not conclude that Paul is wearing a red shirt on the basis of a premise to the effect that I see that he is wearing a red shirt. I just come to believe what I do in fact see – that Paul is wearing a red shirt. According to McDowell, this *is* a rational operation, even if it is not an inference. Indeed,

when we explain someone's believing that things are thus and so in terms of her perceiving that things are thus and so, we are displaying the belief as a result of this kind of operation of rationality in its ideal form.¹⁷

Consider a variation of the example. Paul is in fact wearing a yellow shirt. Unbeknownst to me, the lightning conditions are such that yellow fabrics appear red. In this case, I do not see that Paul is wearing a red shirt. It only appears to me as if he is wearing a red shirt. So, what I come to believe is only what things appear to me to be like. In this case, I am still engaged in the sort of rational operation McDowell is talking about. I am still moving within the space of reasons, the space of justification. But I go wrong, misled by the appearance. In contrast to the previous case, where I come to believe what I do in fact see, in this second variation I fail to achieve a satisfactory standing in the space of reasons:

16 McDowell (2009a), 131.

17 McDowell (2009a), 132.

When we explain someone's believing that things are thus and so in terms of the fact that her experience merely seems to reveal to her that things are thus and so, the explanation depicts the belief as a result of rationality leading its possessor astray[.]¹⁸

At this point, the following objection is likely to arise: How can McDowell say that my standing in the space of *reasons* is less satisfactory in the second case than in the first? Surely, from *my* point of view, there is no difference as far as my right to believe that Paul is wearing a red shirt is concerned. In both cases, it appears to me that Paul is wearing a red shirt, and this appearance is what I go on in both cases. So, why say that my *rational proceedings* are somehow flawed in the second case, if they were flawless in the first? Isn't the difference simply that in the first case, the world did me a favor? – it just so happened that things were as I experienced them to be.

McDowell's response to this objection is that it takes for granted a mistakenly restricted conception of rationality – a conception according to which “we ought to be able to achieve flawless standings in the space of reasons by our own unaided resources, without needing the world to do us any favors.”¹⁹ According to McDowell, my success in being *fully rational* may indeed depend on the world doing me a favor. He is rejecting what he describes as an “interiorization of the justifications available to us for claims about the external world”, noticing that such interiorization “threatens to deprive us of the justificatory power of, for instance, the form ‘I see that ...’.”²⁰ It is a consequence of McDowell's view that I may in a sense be doxastically blameless – I may have done all that my peers can reasonably require of me by way of justification – and yet fail to be rationally entitled to my belief that *p*. It is this notion of rational entitlement that McDowell thinks we need to understand.

McDowell says, I “come to believe” that Paul is wearing a red shirt by way of having a certain experience. The crucial question is: How are we to spell out this process, this “coming to believe”? On the *one* hand, my coming to believe that Paul is wearing a red shirt is supposed to be rational. So, it is not (as the coherentist thinks) a matter of the experience just causing the formation of a belief. On the *other* hand, the process is not to be conceived of in inferential terms. For, as we saw in the

18 McDowell (2009a), 132.

19 McDowell (1998), 395 f.

20 McDowell (2002), 98.

previous section, this would make inevitable the traditional and hopeless idea that the process has as its starting-point a non-factive characterization of the experience I am having. So, we are looking for a rational yet non-inferential process of justification. What on earth could that be?

At this point, the crucial thing is to realize that, by McDowell's lights, the question that we are asking has in an important sense already been answered. More precisely, the question is misplaced to the extent that it presumes that the account McDowell has already given leaves it open how the 'coming to believe' is to be spelled out – as if what he has said so far allows for a wide spectrum of construals, from the coherentist's non-rational, causal one, to the traditionalist's conception of the process as inferential. In fact, McDowell takes it that what he has said in the passages quoted above – that, in the ideal case, acquiring a perceptual belief involves coming to believe that things are as one's experience reveals that things are – is determinate enough to be incompatible with both the coherentist and the traditionalist accounts of the belief-forming process. The apparently underspecified term 'coming to believe', as it occurs there, is in fact already specific enough to exclude both the idea that the process is merely causal and the idea that the process is inferential.

Why? Well, what we are talking about is the process of coming to believe, of accepting, that things are thus and so – namely, as one's experience reveals that they are. According to McDowell, this description is not a description of a dumb, non-conceptual, merely causal process. As was emphasized already in section 1 above, he thinks it presupposes that the perceiver responds to her experience as something that has conceptual content, and that requires that she is a rational animal who can employ the relevant conceptual resources also in free, critical reasoning.²¹ Nor is the description a description of an inferential process. The perceiver comes to believe precisely *what she sees*, namely that p. Hence, due to the Moorean dependence of 'seeing that p' on 'believing that p', the process cannot be one of going from an initially accepted premise (I see that p) to an only subsequently accepted conclusion (that p).

Now one may perhaps continue to feel that even if such unreflective acceptance presupposes that one is a rational animal who is able to employ the relevant conceptual resources also in free, critical argumentation, the particular process of acceptance itself still cannot be rational.

21 McDowell (2009a), 140 f.

For this process is, after all, unreflective – and isn't lack of reflection precisely a mark of non-rationality?

This objection does not seem very strong, however. To be sure, in cases where reflection and critical scrutiny is called for, forming a belief without such reflection and scrutiny is not rational. But in a case where there is no specific positive reason to distrust one's senses, why not say that trusting them without further ado *is* rational? In fact, it seems quite strained to deny that it is rational to accept that things are as one's experience reveals that they are. If I see that the tie is green, and I have no specific reasons not to believe that the tie is green, then my believing that the tie is green seems like a clear case of rational belief-formation. Of course, one may *stipulate* that only inferential processes are to be counted as 'rational'. By McDowell's lights, however, such a stipulation only serves to hide the deep connection that he is trying to expose, between critical assessment and unreflective trust.

At this point, McDowell's imagined opponent is likely to feel that his question is being begged. For what he wants to say is that reflection and critical scrutiny *are* called for in the relevant cases, and that we spuriously hide this requirement from view by employing a factive characterization of the experience in question: 'I see that the tie is green'. *Of course* it seems rational to accept that things are as one's experience reveals that they are. But, the objector continues, what the unreflective acceptance is *really* based on is what is captured by a *non-factive* characterization of the experience in question. And it is *not* very strained to deny that it is rational to accept without further ado that the tie is green if it only *looks* green. On the contrary, given such a non-factive characterization of the experiential basis for my perceptual belief, reflection on the experience's credibility might indeed seem required if the acceptance is going to count as rational.

But *is* there a good question that is being begged here, really? After all, what our imagined objector is doing is to slide back into precisely that "interiorization of the justifications available to us for claims about the external world" that McDowell is trying to show us how to avoid. According to McDowell's diagnosis, it is just this interiorization of the space of reasons that stops us from acknowledging the rationality of accepting without further ado what one's senses reveal about how things are. Given that the space of reasons is seen as purely interior, it will appear as if non-factive characterizations of experience is what we need if we want to capture the real structure of the perceptual belief-forming process, and that this process will be rational only if it involves

reflection on the credibility of one's experience. The problem, McDowell argues, is that this makes it impossible to understand not only how we can gain empirical knowledge, but, more fundamentally, how the very concepts we use when we purport to describe external reality can have any content at all. And if we do not understand how the concepts we use in purporting to describe external reality can have any content, we do not really understand how internal experience can be described either. If it is incomprehensible how 'The tie is green' can have content, it is no less incomprehensible how 'It looks as if the tie is green', or 'I have the impression that there is a green tie there', can have content.²² In trying to think of the space of reasons as interior, we ultimately lose our grip on how that space can be a space of *reasons*, of concepts, at all. If this is right, the question that McDowell may seem to be begging is not a coherent question at all.

Returning now to the issue of inferential versus non-inferential perceptual belief-formation: McDowell would of course not deny that some perceptual beliefs are formed only after certain inferential steps have been taken. In cases where I initially suspect that the lightning conditions are not normal, I may reason as follows:

Yesterday a special bulb made the lightning conditions here such that yellow fabrics looked red.

I'm now having the visual impression that Paul is wearing a red shirt.

In order to decide whether to trust that impression, I better check if the lightning conditions are now normal.

(After inspecting the bulb:)

I see that the bulb is now a normal one.

Consequently, Paul is wearing a red shirt.

Here, I do step back from and scrutinize the veridicality of my impression that Paul is wearing a red shirt. According to McDowell, the ability to engage in this sort of critical scrutiny is essential to having conceptual capacities, and, hence, to the reflective *and* unreflective formation of perceptual beliefs. At the same time, I hope that what I have said in this paper makes it clear that, according to McDowell, such critical assessment – involving, as it inevitably does, inferential steps – cannot generally or typically be involved in perceptual belief-formation. For if it were, then there would be no genuinely significant material to start reasoning with: the alleged inferences would no longer contain premises with a determinate content.

22 McDowell (1996), 29 ff.

I have reached the conclusion I said I was going to substantiate in this paper. Despite some passages in *Mind and World* that might seem to point in another direction, it is in fact a cornerstone of McDowell's view that in the typical case of perceptual belief-formation, one does not engage in critical assessment but simply trusts one's senses without further ado. Indeed, McDowell's conception entails that it cannot be otherwise – that the very idea of someone who forms perceptual beliefs only after having reflected on the credibility of his experiences makes no sense at all. Importantly, however, McDowell's view should not be conflated with the idea that our unreflective acceptance of what our senses reveal about the world is a matter of non-rational, merely causal coercion. The relevant sort of acceptance or trust is a process that can occur only in rational, concept-using animals – animals that, in particular cases, can step back from a given experience and consider whether that experience is really trustworthy. The possibility of trust and the possibility of critical assessment are in that sense interdependent, and equally basic. In another sense, however, trust is more fundamental. For it must constitute the default attitude we have toward our senses, whereas distrust requires some special, concrete motivation. According to McDowell, in those typical cases where there is no special reason to doubt one's senses, unreflective trust is what full rationality amounts to.

7. Concluding Remark: Recent Changes in McDowell's View

In this paper, I have described what I take to be McDowell's view in *Mind and World*. I have also argued that this is a view which can be found in many of his later writings. It is, however, clear that in recent years – most explicitly in 'Avoiding the Myth of the Given', a paper originally published in 2008²³ – McDowell has changed his conception of experience. In particular, even if he still holds that experiences have conceptual content, he no longer thinks of that content as propositional.

Hence, some of the passages I have quoted in this paper are passages to which he would no longer subscribe, at least not without substantial qualification. For example, consider the earlier quoted claim that "the content that [an explanation of a perceptual belief in terms of experience] attributes to the experience is the same as the content of the belief explained, not a premise from which it would make sense to think of

²³ Lindgaard (2008).

the subject as having reached the belief by an inferential step.” McDowell would no longer say that the content of the experience is *the same as* the content of the belief. Does this mean that he would also have to take back what he says in the ensuing clause – that the content of the experience is not a premise from which it makes sense to think of the subject as having reached the belief by an inferential step? If so, much of what I have said about McDowell may no longer be true of him. To decide this issue, it is of course necessary to describe the details of his new conception. I cannot do that here, not just due to a lack of space, but also due to a lack of understanding – I’m still struggling with getting clear about McDowell’s present views. I suspect and would like to think that the interpretation I have given is largely in line also with his current ideas. But that will have to be the topic of another paper.²⁴

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